



Testimony to the Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
Department of Developmental Services - February 24, 2022

I am writing to comment on House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023.

From: Nadjeska Reilly
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To: Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Nadjeska Reilly, and I am the Employment Services Manager at SARAH Inc. We are a non-profit organization providing services to more than 1400 children and adults with differing abilities across 5 counties, in 50 towns, in Connecticut. My role at SARAH Inc. is to first and foremost ensure the health and wellbeing for those within my agency and to ensure those who want to work can find employment that is meaningful to them. My platform allows me to support and encourage those who can, to advocate for themselves and when needed to step in and advocate on their behalf. I am proud to be a part of SARAH Inc. who's mission is to provide quality, person centered services.

First, I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. However, while the increase in this year's budget is appreciated, it has quickly been absorbed by rising costs. Over the last year, inflation rose by almost 6%, surpassing the 4% COLA in the current year's budget.

This funding is needed now more than ever. Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted everyone in one manner or another. I am proud of the efforts made by SARAH Inc. to uphold expectations of providing the highest quality of services. This has not come without cost. Our employees have worked tirelessly to for two years to make on going changes to ensure safety, wellbeing while providing in-person services. Management conducts regular check in with individuals receiving services, families, guardians, case managers, nurses, doctors, other providers to ensure standards are being met.

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In addition to those rising costs, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff. Across the state non-profits employ more than 115,000 people, but recently The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are now vacant. The employee shortage is one of the leading causes to longer wait lists to get into programs and a decrease in quality of services. How can SARA Inc., other non-profits, and Connecticut expect to fully support thousands of individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities or delays without the funding needed to back these essential supports?

Our staff are dedicated to their work because of the love they have for those within our programs. Our agency has been faced with a staffing shortage. This has impacted us greatly. We have had everyone within our agency step up to provide services. It has been difficult to do the work of several people to ensure services are not impacted by the shortage.

Moreover, non-profit providers funded by the Department of Developmental Services are grateful for the efforts of the Appropriations Committee and Governor Lamont to address wage and funding issues specific to services for the Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities population. Last year's Group Home Settlement provided significant funding to increase the minimum wage for direct support staff in DDS agencies.

However, the group home settlement also created significant challenges:

- First, the terms of the settlement provided wage increases of as much as 11.6% for entry level staff, which next year will increase to 14.5%. But the agreement only provides a 3% increase to everyone else. Staff who before July were making only slightly above the new minimum, often people who had years or decades of experience or managing other staff, found themselves suddenly paid almost the same as a new hire.
- Second, the funding dedicated a pool of dollars to enhance employee benefits, but to date none of that funding has been disbursed to providers. We understand it to total less than half what providers have told DDS they would need.

This is causing significant wage compression issues within organizations. Within SARA Inc. you will find dedicated management teams who work endless days to meet the needs of the programs. The compensation does not reflect the number of hours and the quality that is being given. This has also had an impact on burn out rate within the agency.

During this legislative session we ask that you please help SARA Inc. and every other essential non-profits by:

- **Ensuring adequate funding for non-profits.** Last year the legislature voted to increase funding for nonprofits by 4%, which was a big step in making up for the chronic underfunding of non-profits. But since then, inflation has been 6%. Please adequately fund non-profits so that there isn't a continued funding deficit and to ensure services will be provided to the most vulnerable residents.
- **Addressing the increasing wage compression issues.** While it is appreciated that minimum wage is being fairly increased for new hires, there are now experienced

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employees who have been at non-profits for years who are receiving almost the same pay rate due to only an annual 3% salary increase.

We respectfully ask that you remember SARAH Inc. and other agencies like ours during the upcoming legislative session. We are providing essential services without adequate rates to sustainably continue to fund our services.

Thank you,

Nadjeska Reilly